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ABSTRACT

A procedure is presented for communicating evaluation results to various publics in an effort to achieve wider use of the results. A combination of strategies from the evaluation specialist and public relations specialists first requires an analysis of the perceptions of people with whom the evaluators wish to communicate. This analysis must determine what the public already knows, their misconceptions, their information sources, and which groups should receive the highest priority. Strategies for communication are determined in the planning phase, which considers the various publics concerned, the message, the presentation source, the information channel, reaction monitoring, and feedback used in the next cycle of planning. The actual communication of information should be very broad at the onset with progressively greater specificity to provide basic information, persuade or clarify. The final task is to evaluate the effectiveness of the communication, including listening to criticisms and being ready to make indicated changes. (CM)

COMMUNICATING EVALUATION RESULTS TO THE PUBLIC: A FOUR STEP PROCESS

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A major problem facing all evaluators is non-utilization of results (cf., Patton, 1978; Haenn, 1980). A frequent factor in non-utilization of re-u-ts is lack of communication or miscommunication between evaluator and public. The purpose of this paper is to outline a procedure for communicating evaluation results to various publics in an effort to achieve wider use of evaluation results. This paper, in its approach and authorship, represents a combination of strategies from the evaluation specialist and the public relations specialist.

This approach is depicted graphically below in Figure 1.

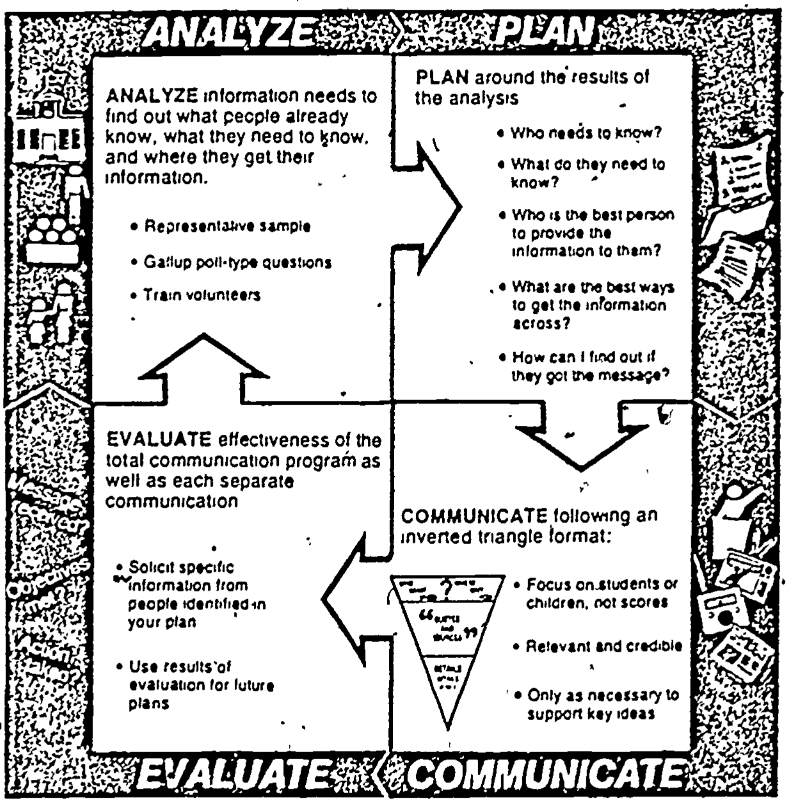

Figure 1. Four step process of communicating evaluation results to the public

The process consists of four steps. In the first step we analyze. The second step is plan. In the planning phase, strategies for communicating with various individuals and groups are mapped out. The third step is to communicate. This is the most obvious step and the one in which we actually present a message to a person or to a group of people. The fourth step is to evaluate. In this stage, we determine whether or not the analysis, planning, and communication have been effective. What we want to know at this stage is whether or not the communication achieved its intended purpose. Inasmuch as the evaluation feeds into the next round of analysis, the process is cyclical. We now turn our attention to a detailed discussion of each of the four steps.

Analyze

The first step of any communication requires that we analyze the perceptions of the people with whom we wish to communicate. This entails finding out what people already know about the educational program of interest, what their misconceptions might be, and where they have gotten information about this program in the past. An excellent example of an analysis of people's perceptions of public schools is the annual Gallup Poll of education (cf. Gallup, September, 1981).

According to a recent Gallup Poll (1979), approximately one adult in three has children enrolled in public schools. The other two-thirds of the adult population have no children enrolled in public schools. Furthermore, there are some interesting differences between those adults who do have children enrolled in the public schools and those who do not.

In 1979, approximately half of all adults who had children in school (49%) indicated that they believed that schools were doing a good job. That is, 49% of the adults surveyed would give the school an "A" or "B" rating. It must be pointed out here that the pollsters did not provide criteria for A, B, C, D, E or F ratings. Each respondent was free to supply his or her own rating criteria.

Of the two-thirds of the adult population who had no children in school, the number who gave public schools an "A" or "B" rating was 29%. In 1981, 30% of this group gave the public schools an "A" or "B" rating (however, only 46% of parents of public school children gave the schools an "A" or "B" rating).

Among the group of adults who had no children in school, 29% expressed the belief that schools have gotten worse in some way in the last ten years. Although this question was not addressed in the 1980 or 1981 Gallup Polls, it may be safe to assume, based on the relative stability of the overall rating question, that an equivalent number of non-parents will continue to have this perception of the public schools today.

The Gallup Poll is merely one example of analysis at the national level. This approach is an extremely effective one and one that is not prohibitively costly or complex to use at the local level. In fact, many school districts currently employ a survey similar to that used in the annual Gallup Poll of education. The questions are available as are directions on how to select questions and train interviewers (Gallup, 1981, p.46; Banach, 1980).

The crucial aspect of analysis is that the information gathered in the analysis be gathered from a truly random sample of people. It is too often the case that program administrators and evaluators rely on information that is too close and too biased to be of help in spotting points of deep public concern about those programs. As noted previously, the methodology for selecting and training interviewers and conducting the interviews is available and relatively inexpensive. In many instances, parents or volunteer groups have been used to conduct the interviews. The actual numbers of responses required to achieve a sufficient level of precision in the survey are shown below in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Sample Sizes Needed to Detect Trends

In Survey Results with ± 5% Accuracy

(95% Confidence Level)

Proportion Giving a Particular Response

Population	.05 or .95	.10 or .90	.20 or .80	.30 or .70	.40 or .60	.50
Over 10,000	75	150	260	315	365	400
10,000	75	140	245	315	360	370
5,000	75	135	235	305	345	360
4,000	75	135	235	300	340	355
3,000	75	135	230	295	330	345
2,000	75	130	220	280	315	325
1,000	70	125	200	245	270	280
900	70	125	195	240	265	270
800	70	120	190	235	255	260
700	70	120	185	225	245	250
600	70	115	175	215	230	235
500	65	110	165	200	215	220
400	65	105	155	180	195	200
300	60	95	140	160	170	170
200	55	85	115	125	130	135
100	45	60	75	80	80	80
50	30	40	45	45	45	45

Table 2

Maximum Sample Sizes Needed to Assure 95% Confidence

In Survey Results With ± X% Accuracy

Population Size	Degree of Accuracy Required ± 1%	± 2%	± 5%	± 10%
Over 10,000	10,000	2500	400	100
10,000	4900	1940	370	100
5,000	3290	1625	360	95
4,000	2835	1505	355	95
3,000	2290	1335	345	95
2,000	1660	1095	325	95
1,000	910	710	280	90
900	825	655	270	90
800	740	600	260	90
700	655	545	250	85
600	565	480	235	85
500	480	415	220	85
400	385	345	200	80
300	295	270	170	75
200	200	185	135	70
100	100	100	80	50
50	50	50	45	35

Example: You want to be able to interpret responses with ± 5% accuracy. From a population of 3000 people, you select a sample of 345. On a particular issue, 47% of the people in the sample respond in a certain way. You can predict with 95% confidence that between 42% and 52% of the people in the population would respond in that way on that issue. As the sample proportion departs from 50%, the confidence interval becomes even narrower. Thus, for example, if 78% of the sample had responded in a certain way, you could predict with 95% confidence that between 73.9% and 82.1% of the population would respond that way.

Table 1 represents the sample sizes necessary to achieve plus-or-minus 5% accuracy at the 95% confidence level. This table is specifically related to questions which will yield percentage type responses. For example, if respondents are asked the question "Do you think our schools are doing a good job?" some will say yes, some will say no, and some will be undecided. The expected percentages of any one of these categories will dictate to some extent the size of the sample needed. If, for example, 30% or 70% of the respondents are expected to give a particular response, and if the local population is 5,000, then a sample size of 305 is needed to achieve plus or minus 5% accuracy at the 95% confidence level.

Table 2 assumes the closest possible split on any issue. As any issue approaches a 50/50 split, the size of sample needed to assure accuracy increases. In other words, an issue on which 80% of the population gives the same answer is not a very controversial issue. Therefore, a relatively small sample size can detect fairly accurately what the population percentage actually is. On the other hand, where 50% of the population believes one thing and 50% believes another, we have a controversial issue on our hands. Where there is controversy, larger sample sizes are needed to assure accuracy. Table 2 not only shows sample sizes needed for plus or minus five percent precision accuracy but for plus or minus 1%, plus or minus 2%, and plus or minus 10% precision. It should be noted that even with large sample sizes (anything over 10,000) a plus or minus 2% degree of precision can be achieved with a sample size of 2,500. A degree of precision of plus or minus 5% can be achieved with a sample of 400 for populations of 10,000 or more.

One critical aspect of selecting a sample size is to identify the potential users of the information you will be gathering. If this audience doesn't approve of or understand the sample size or the sampling procedures, the results will have no impact. Therefore, it is imperative that sample size be discussed with potential information users.

Finally, there are three crucial questions to address in the analysis. These are:

- o What do they know?
- o What misconceptions exist?
- o Where did they get their information?

In preparing to communicate with any audience or public, it is necessary to find out what information has already been shared with that public. This activity encompasses the first and third questions shown above. It is necessary not only to find out what the public already knows about the particular educational program of interest but where they obtained this information as well. Was it from reliable sources? Was it from friendly or unfriendly sources? Was it from biased sources?

This last question leads us to the issue of whether or not misconceptions exist. In working with Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, I continue to find that many people have serious misconceptions about this program at the national, state, and local levels. Quite frequently, non-Title I teachers and principals in buildings which are served with Title I funds have serious misconceptions about the identity of Title I. Any attempt to communicate evaluation results to individuals who have a basic misconception about the nature of the program being evaluated is doomed to failure.

Plan

As information from the analysis becomes available, evaluators can move on to the second step of the communication process. In this planning step, there are actually six components to consider. These are: 1) public; 2) message; 3) source; 4) channel; 5) reaction, and 6) feedback. Each of these components is described in some detail below.

Public. In planning to present evaluation results, the first point which evaluators must recognize is the fact that the public actually consists of several different groups or individuals. These individuals and groups can be referred to as publics. Each public will be characteristically different from each other public. The purposes for communicating with the various publics will also be quite diverse.

The first planning task, therefore, is to determine exactly who the various publics are. The analysis may have revealed, for example, that one public holds certain misconceptions about the program being considered, that another group has very strong feelings about that same program, or that another group is a priority public because of their day-to-day contact with that particular program. In practice, the number of publics may be quite large.

For example, one might first divide publics into internal publics and external publics. Internal publics are those individuals or groups who have day-to-day contact with students or programs. External publics, on the other hand, are those individuals or groups who would not have day-to-day contact with student or programs. Each of these groups can be further subdivided into smaller groups. For example, internal publics might be divided into students, teachers, administrators, other school employees, and so on. Even one of these groups might be further subdivided into smaller groups. For example, the teacher group might well be divided into new teachers, elementary grade teachers, resource teachers, and a host of other teacher categories. The point is that each of these specific publics differs from other publics in ways that are relevent to the next five planning components.

Message. Each public will eventually receive a slightly different message. The basic message may well be the same for all publics. For example, the basic message might well be that the program is effective. However, because each of the publics has slightly different functions and information needs, the specific message which ultimately reaches each public will be slightly different from the others. The following example from Title I evaluation is offerred as illustration.

Consider three groups of individuals whom we will identify as Public A, Public B, and Public C. The concern of Public A is the relationship between Title I assistance and achievement in the regular school program. From the general message that the program is effective, the specific message for this group might be "The children are showing marked improvement in reading and in other areas." Public B has overall responsibility for moving programs forward and is very responsive to information concerning test scores. Therefore, the specific message for this public might be "program changes have led to better reading test scores." Finally, Public C is concerned about children once they leave the Title I program. For this public, the specific message is based on a sustained effects study and might be stated "most children are continuing to show progress even without extra help." In other words we have geared each message toward the specific characteristics and information needs of the various publics even though the basic message might be the same.

The implication for evaluation planning should be obvious. The evaluator who plans to communicate evaluation results effectively to several publics will need to identify many sources of information. These information sources must then be woven together into a coherent, overall evaluation design. Some information sources may only be appropriate to one or two publics. To the extent that those publics can have an impact on the program being evaluated, the corresponding information sources become high priority sources.

Source. Just as it is necessary to gear specific messages to the information needs and characteristics of different publics, it is necessary to have that message presented by a credible source. By source we mean an individual whom the public trusts. Again, note that we are defining public here in very specific terms; for example, parents of children in a particular neighborhood, non-Title I teachers in a particular school, etc.

Generally speaking, the more the specific public and the source have in common, the more credible the source will be. School public relations experts speak of key communicators with this idea in mind. Key communicators are people who are usually fairly easily identified in any group. Basic sociometric techniques, whether formally or informally applied, may be used to discover who the "stars" of any group are. These individuals are likely to be the ones from whom other individuals in the group get their information.

Returning to the 67% of adults who have no children in the public schools, we can discover many specific publics within this group. This group consists of civic and religious groups, neighborhood groups, social groups, recreation groups, work groups, and many other subgroups or publics. Within each of the subgroups or publics there are one or more stars or key communicators who can easily be identified. A major step in communication then is to cultivate these specific individuals as sources.

This process is most appropriate at the school level but may also be applied at the district level as well. Many school principals and some district-level administrators keep lists of key communicators along with the phone numbers of those key communicators handy. Whenever something important happens or is about to happen, the school principals or other administrators inform key communicators who then spread the word throughout the rest of the group. These same principals and administrators also call periodic meetings just to keep key communicators up-to-date. This raises an important issue. School principals are absolutely essential links in any communication process about any school program whether it be with internal publics or with external publics. A good deal of attention should be given to school principals in the analysis phase to determine what these people know about the specific programs of interest what their attitudes toward them are, and what their impact on the programs is likely to be.

<u>Channel</u>. Having identified several different publics, their information needs, and appropriate sources for presenting information to those publics, we turn our attention to deciding which channels of communication are most appropriate. The results of the analysis step of the process may yield some helpful information in deciding upon one or more channels of information. For example, the results of the analysis may show that certain individuals or publics normally get their information in certain ways and prefer getting their information in those ways. A concensus among communication experts seems to be that the mass media (newspaper, television, radio) are appropriate for disseminating large amounts of information to many people over a short period of time. However, these channels are not appropriate for shaping public opinion. Our opinions are typically shaped through interpersonal communication channels.

If the objective of communication is simply to disseminate basic information to a wide audience with no intent to shape or mold opinion or behavior, mass media are appropriate. On the other hand, if the analysis reveals there are negative attitudes or misconceptions or hostility toward the program, then the correction of these negative attitudes and hostilities will require interpersonal approaches. One example of negative attitudes might be resentment against Title I harbored by non-Title I teaching staff. No amount of brochures, newsletters, posters, or other devices is likely to have any effect on this resentment. What will be required is that one Title I person discuss rationally with one non-Title I person what is actually going on in the program and how the program affects and interacts with the total school program. This one non-Title I person may then be considered a key communicator who can in turn relay the message to other non-Title I teaching staff. This is why an analysis of internal publics is so important, and it is why identification of key communicators is also important.

As a final note, one can never be absolutely sure which channel will be the most effective in getting a message across to a specific public. Therefore, whenever the chance presents itself, it is helpful to present the same or similar messages to a given public through as many channels as possible. For example, in an AERA paper presentation, there are at least two channels of communication; the written word and the spoken word. The written or spoken word is often supplemented with graphs, tables, or other kinds of illustrations. Some may respond more positively to a question and answer session. It is quite conceivable that four or five different channels might be used in a 15-minute AERA paper presentation. Within those five channels, there is likely to be something for nearly every member of the audience. The same is true for other audiences or publics.

Reaction and Feedback. As we are deciding who needs to know what and who should present this information through which channels, we also need to give some thought to the method by which we will find out whether or not the communication was effective. In this regard we must focus on two concepts. As information is presented to people, they have varying reactions. Some examples of reactions are letters to the editors of newspapers, calls to a school board about a particularly volatile issue, and people telling you after an AERA presentation that you did a good job. These are all reactions. The single problem with all these reactions is that they tend to yield a biased or distorted picture of how the entire public received the message. Therefore, it is necessary to plan for the active solicitation of different kinds of reactions from a representative sample of the specific public. This active solicitation of reactions is termed feedback.

The strategies for getting feedback are very similar to some of the strategies employed in the analysis step of the process. Therefore, the plan may include a formal sampling of specific publics, or it may simply consist of follow-up conversations with several key communicators. Whatever the plan is, it is important for the evaluator or others involved in the planning to remember that the feedback must be representative. In order for the feedback to be representative it must be actively solicited. Reliance on unsolicited reaction has kept more than one good evaluator working in the dark.

Communicate

Having been through the first two steps of the process, we come to the step where information is actually shared with someone else. This step should be a lot easier if the first two steps have been carefully taken. In a sense, this step may be considered similar to the tip of an iceberg. It is the part that is seen but is actually the smallest component.

With the exception of editors of scientific journals and perhaps some of our colleagues, the basic format for all communications of evaluation results should be fairly similar. This format is graphically depicted below in Figure 2. Figure 2 shows the six basic questions addressed by journalists followed by credible quotes from credible sources, followed by the details.

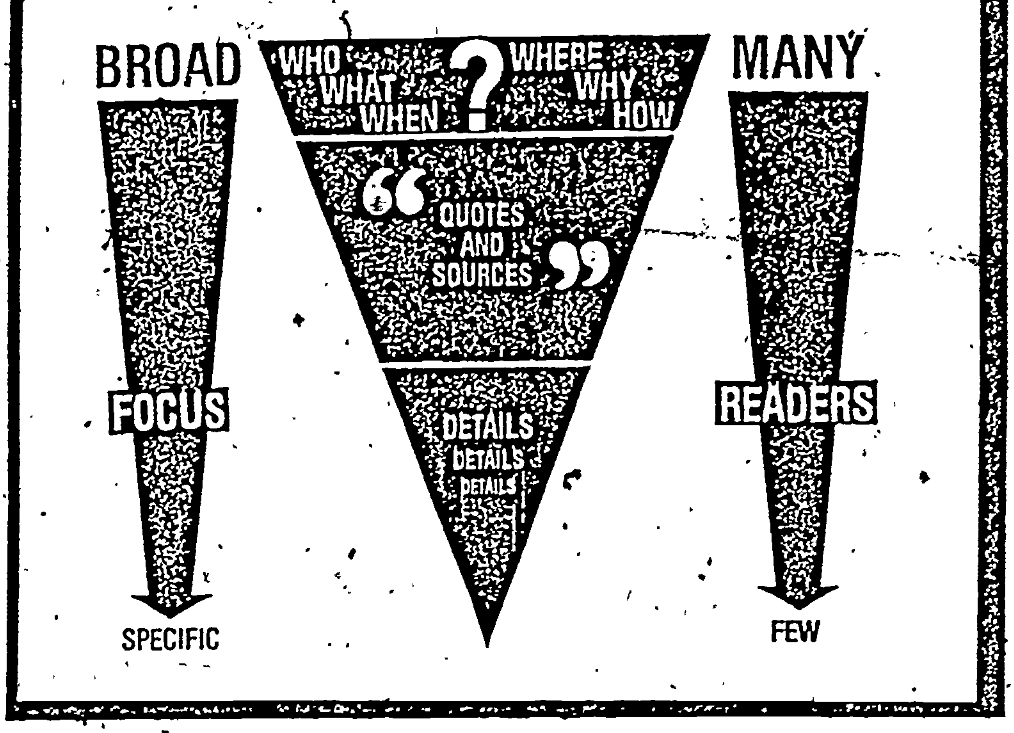

Figure 2. Basic communication format

The format depicted in Figure 2 is not just for newspaper articles but for brochures, newsletters, oral presentations, and even formal evaluation reports. As early as possible in a presentation of results, the evaluator needs to identify who did something, what they did, when and where they did it, why they did it, and how they did it. Particularly important with information intended for mass consumption, we need to tell the public that we are talking about children. If we are not talking about children, we really do not have much to say (even to the two-thirds of adults who do not have children in the public schools).

One point to note is that the first part of the presentation is quite broad but not very deep. That is, a great deal of ground is covered with little or no detail. This is precisely the kind of information that is called for here; that is, a broad overview that does not go into too much detail. Details can be saved for later when you have the attention of the intended public.

Having gotten the attention of the specific public, it is helpful to move on to more specific information. The next section of the triangle depicted in Figure 2 is entitled Quotes and Sources. The sources are those individuals referred to earlier as credible sources to specific publics. Any good newspaper article, for example, will quote people who are intimately familiar with the facts of the story or who are directly involved in the incident being reported. Again, recalling an earlier comment, it will be helpful to match sources to publics. Thus, for example, presentations to parent groups might well include oral or written comments from other parents. Presentations to school boards, on the other hand, might include observations from teachers, members of the community, or other groups of whom the board members depend for their political base. Again, there is an obvious implication for evaluation practice. These comments constitute legitimate evaluation data for some publics and must therefore be collected.

The bottom portion of the triangle depicted in Figure 2 contains the details. This is the proper place for tables, numerical and statistical analyses, and other supporting details. Except for mandated statistical reports, these details should be kept to an absolute minimum. This is also not the time or place to summarize. The summary should have been at the very beginning.

Assuming that we are talking about a written report, you will have many readers at the beginning and fewer readers at the end. A simple way to illustrate this concept is to consider how you read a newspaper. You probably read the headlines and perhaps the first paragraph or two of most articles on page one. If a story begins on page one and is continued on page 36, it is not likely that you will finish the story on page 36.

Unless the story or article is about an issue that greatly concerns you or has a direct impact on your life, you will not read beyond the first paragraph. If you are mildly interested in the topic, you will read a bit more to see who is involved and what their comments are. Only if you are extremely interested in or excited about the topic will you read all the way to the end of the article on page 36. The same is true for oral reports and written reports. If the purpose of the oral report is not clear by the end of the first few seconds, then very few people will have the intrinsic motivation to follow your line of thought until the end of the presentation.

In this respect, evaluators can not afford to take a scholarly point of view in reporting. That is, we do not have the luxury of providing an extensive discussion of background and methodology prior to the presentation of results and our conclusions. Conclusions must usually be presented first followed by background. In this sense, the format for communicating or presenting the information may be exactly the opposite of what many of us have been taught in graduate school as proper writing techniques.

In summary then, the focus of any communication should be very broad at the outset and become more and more specific. This is true whether the purpose of the communication is to provide basic information, or to persuade, or to clarify misconceptions, or to achieve any other purpose.

Evaluate

Having presented a well defined message to a specific well-identified public, there is a tremendous temptation to believe that the job of communication is finished. However, it is not. The final task in any communication is to evaluate the effectiveness of that communication. A major reason for conducting this evaluation is the fact that there are likely to be future opportunities or needs to communicate with the same public. Unless the evaluator or other individual presenting the information has a thorough understanding of the effectiveness of the communication, that person cannot plan effectively for future communications. Some questions that need to be considered in this evaluation are "Did the public receive the message? Was the purpose of the communication achieved?" Stated somewhat differently, "Were the objectives met? Was any action taken? Did we reach them in time?"

A crucial aspect of evaluation is being able to deal with several different possible answers to the questions presented above. There is an old axiom that if you can't deal with the answer, don't ask the question. In other words, evaluators and program administrators should be prepared to listen carefully to criticisms and be ready to make changes where changes are clearly indicated. If a report is presented to a parent group, for example, evaluators can talk to key communicators or a random sample of the people in the group to ask what they thought of the report. Did it seem accurate? Has it changed any of their attitudes? What did it mean in terms of their children or school?

In evaluating the effectiveness of any communication, it is important for the evaluator to keep several points in mind. First, people have selective memories. What this means in communication is that those portions of the communication which support individuals' existing points of view are more likely to be remembered and understood than those portions of the communication which do not. In extreme cases, information receivers may actually remember exactly the opposite of what the source said and yet believe that it is exactly what the source said. Second, where the subject is controversial, those individuals who have taken sides are very unlikely to attend to new information. Of course, the evaluator will be well aware of the existing beliefs and views of the publics with whom he or she is communicating from the results of the analysis conducted in the first step. In the planning step the evaluator or other communicator will have established communication objectives accordingly. Given reasonable and manageable communication objectives, the evaluation is more likely to produce results that will be effective in the next round of communication.

Summary

In communicating with the public on the success of any school program, it is first necessary to determine what the public already knows, what misconceptions people may have, where people get their information, and who are likely to be the top priority publics. Given this information, it is possible to develop thorough plans for communication. These plans consist of a series of decisions concerning who needs to know what, who should present the information through what channel, and how the response to the communication will be monitored. Next, the plan is implemented such that the big picture is given first and the details last. Finally, feedback from the public is actively solicited in an effort to determine whether or not effective communication is taking place. This feedback is then used in the next cycle of planning. In this way, the process becomes not a linear one of four steps but a cyclical step where each step leads to another.

At several points in the process, we have actively sought input from other people. Thus, communication must be viewed as a two-way process. In essence, we listen as well as speak. Generally speaking, communication of evaluation results to the public is more effective if we are generally listening rather than generally speaking.

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